

# ABOUT MUSIC

– By Mariss McTucker

## Steffan May: *Forget Yer Face*

**Recorded by Steffan May in basements and bedrooms; mixed by Steffan and Ken May and Chris Cunningham at Basecamp Recording, Bozeman, MT; produced by Chris Cunningham, 2014**

Bozeman songwriter Steffan May recently released an album of 20 tunes; he wrote all but one (“E. Rose” by Jerry Ater). He plays lots of instruments and sings every part, and the music encompasses many country styles and influences. So we have bluegrass, folk, country, nuances of Waylon and Willie and Jerry Jeff Walker, and heck, even the Beach Boys. And there’s a whiff of jazz and pop-rock, too.

A waltz with a spooky backwoods flavor, “The Tune Unfamiliar,” is a good dancer. The speedy “Dichotomy” tells of Jesus’s time on Earth. “A gross miscalculation in the courage of mankind kept on spreading his good news paying danger no mind ...” May sings.

“NTLTT” (huh?) is a good country blues finger-plucker with an odd chord progression that somehow works. In fact, May uses that technique in most of his songs.

“Landmine of Mine” (great title!) exhibits the slight slap of a snare and a catchy, bizarre melody, and May’s Beach Boy harmonies make an appearance as well.

“(Aren’t You) Grateful” shows off May’s snappy, busy pickin’. He also sings a bit in octave unison with himself, and it works because of his proficient range. He has a really cool bass register that complements his good baritone.

The old-time sound makes an appearance in “Red Bird (Lookin’ for a Sign).” Banjo comes first, but soon soaring steel and electric guitar riffs country it up. There’s one instrumental on the CD, “Stir that Squirrel Gravy.” It’s got a rolling beat and a jazzy, wacky melody. This fellow keeps it interesting, that’s for sure.

Visit him at [www.steffanmaymusic.com](http://www.steffanmaymusic.com).



## Amber Olsson: *Take What You Can*

**Engineered by Dan Nichols at Soul Tree Recording, Helena, MT; produced by Amber Olsson and Dan Nichols, 2014**

Helena singer/songwriter Amber Olsson’s debut album is sharp and crisp, spotlighting her whispery and powerful soprano on 10 originals that comprise a mix of modern country, folk and pop.

The young vocalist plays keys and rhythm guitar on the recording, and ample talent surrounds her. Both co-producer Dan Nichols and Jeremy Slead play drums; Dennis Ferriter adds organ and guitar; Kim Deschamps, slide guitar, pedal steel, and Dobro; and Cody Earnest, guitar. Angie Luchau delivers background vocals.

There’s a spooky and syncopated intro to “That Boy Done Me Wrong,” a bluesy rock number wherein Olsson plots revenge. “Come Back Home” is a tender and pleading ballad during which Olsson parades her singing technique, bending notes while she wails.

A bit of the tropics surfaces in “They Don’t Know You,” with its sleek steel sounds and a great backbeat on the drums. Luchau’s accompanying harmony is spot-on as well.

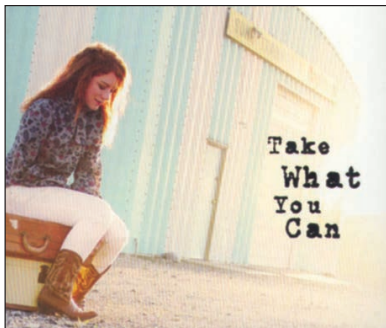
You gotta have a bluegrass jitterbugger, and Olsson provides that on “Tonight I’m Gonna Drive.” There’s a teary waltz, too, “Miss You Like Crazy,” touting a cool melody.

The sweet and wistful “Summer Boy” brandishes swooping vocals and an unexpected chord structure on the bridge. “Love is hard to take back even if it only had a little while,” Olsson sings.

“Want Me Back” has our protagonist picking herself up from heartache. It’s a fuzzed-out rocker with a disco-ey rhythm track. She sings, “Got this new hairdo and bought myself some fancy shoes and I’d like to think that you’d be sorry.”

Olsson demonstrates excellent vocal control on this album, and shows a maturity in her songwriting. The instrumental breaks are sterling, and the same goes for the production from Nichols.

Visit [www.cdbaby.com/cd/amberolsson2](http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/amberolsson2).



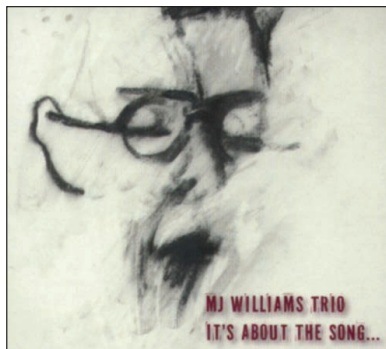
## MJ Williams Trio: *It’s About the Song ...*

**Recorded by Gil Stober at Peak Recording, Bozeman, MT; mixed and mastered by Cookie Marengo at OTR Studios, Belmont, CA, 2014**

Basin resident and Montana’s queen of jazz MJ Williams and her trio have produced a subtle and gentle album, focusing on wistful love ballads. Williams sings on every one, eschewing her trombone prowess this time to feature her fantastic pipes.

Bozeman chums and phenoms Ann Tappan, piano, and Kelly Roberti, bass, fill out the combo. They cover jazz gems written by pairs of composers and lyricists, and throw in an original eye-popper, “Blues for a Bass Player,” to boot.

Bittersweet tenderness is the name of the game here. Dreamy piano from



Tappan launches “Turn Out the Stars,” by Bill Evans and Gene Lees. Williams swoops and slides around her considerable range of octaves on the lyric, effortlessly bending her voice this way and that.

“Blues for a Bass Player,” written by Williams and Tappan, has soft beginnings as Williams sings, “Lovely blue night, City of Light, following the traces of joy and strife.” Then Roberti takes off on an extended bass solo, snapping and slapping the strings every which way, wringing out the vibrato. Next he plays two strings not quite in unison. It’s jarring and sheer cacophony, until Tappan enters to resolve the piece with a sweet piano riff. Yowza!

“The Music is the Magic,” with music and lyrics by Abbey Lincoln, takes an upbeat tack. Its bossa nova beat should loosen your hip joints. There’s a spiffy syncopated bass line, and, as is her wont on most of the tracks, Williams sings scat, vocalizing sounds that are not quite words. She “fa-da-da-dadas” and “blit-ti-a-dayas” her way around the tune, adding some heavy vibrato and a whispering quiver to her voice. Righteous!

On the Thelonious Monk/Mike Ferro composition, “Still We Dream,” about the end of a love affair, it seems as if depression has dulled Williams’s tongue. She sings the lyric almost in slow motion. “So round and round the carousel is winding down” comes out like syrup. Then she scats some drawn-out “ver-va-va-vadd-li-ya-aa vas” quietly, before Tappan re-enters with a pretty piano interlude. What an interpretation!

During “Straight No Chaser,” by Monk and Carmen McCrae, Williams proffers another of her scat trademarks, making her voice talk like her trombone, blipping and blating and badoop-ing, and trading snippets of instrumental conversation with Roberti’s bass. “The time is here,” she sings, “so trust your life to your ear.”

I would dare say she does so, every time she opens her mouth. This is terrific jazz. Crackerjack production from Gil Stober ensures it.

## Britchy: *Every Heartache*

**Recorded by Richie Reinholdt at Animaltown Studios in Missoula, MT, 2014**

Missoula’s duo of Britt Arnesen and Richie Reinholdt have a fourth collaboration out, with 12 originals arranged so that they take turns singing lead on their own pieces. The pair mines the veins of heartbreak in a variety of Americana styles, purging its residue by way of their danceable music.

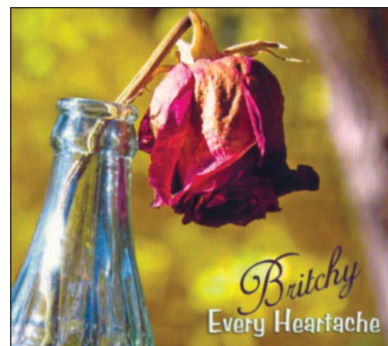
Studio magic allows each to play more than one instrument on a composition: Reinholdt plays electric and acoustic guitars, upright and electric bass, banjo and mandolin; Arnesen adds acoustic guitar, piano and mandolin.

Terrific well-known local pickers lend a hand, too. Tom Wolverton plays pedal steel and Dobro; Larry Chung, fiddle, pedal steel and baritone guitar; Ellie Nuño, fiddle; Andy Dunnigan, Dobro; Chad Fadely mandolin; and Bryan Daste, pedal steel. Trevor Rogers of the Clumsy Lovers adds background vocals on a piece, as well.

The title tune is a nice shuffle with a swingy Bob Wills fiddle feel; it has a pretty melody and countrified thunk. Arnesen sings lead, and Reinholdt’s harmony vocals mesh perfectly. “Empty Eyes” is Reinholdt’s dreamy bluegrass number, and Arnesen sings in French on “La Palouse.”

There’s rockabilly, fingersnappers, and plenty more. “Growler Song” is a welcome detour into the Philipsburg Brewery, a place chock-full of western ambience. Terrific production, as usual, from Reinholdt, makes this one quite polished.

Vist the duo at [www.britchymusic.com](http://www.britchymusic.com).



## The Whizpops: *Sea Blue Sea*

**Produced by Ryan Maynes and the Whizpops at Club Shmed Studios, Missoula, MT; mixed and mastered by Rich Mouser and the Whizpops, 2014**

Missoula’s “silliest children’s band” is awash in its third album; this time, the classroom of natural sciences is the ocean. The wacky gang that teaches children about the world around them through music is made up of Keaton Wilson, keyboards; Casey Schaefer, guitars, vocals, and ukulele; Steve Kalling, upright bass; Margi Cates, vocals; Daniel Kiely, drums and timbales; and Kevin Cashman, guitar and vocals. Special musical guests include producer Ryan Maynes, keyboards; Grace Decker, fiddle; Matt Cornette, banjo; and Jeff Stickney, trumpet and flugelhorn, among others.

The Whizpops’ original songs cover a broad swath of saltwater as well as musical styles. The first one, “Coral Reef,” is a soulful organ-backed rap song. “Dolphin Disco (Super Pod Party),” is spot-on with cookin’ hi-hat and drums, and I swear Margi Cates re-animates Donna Summer here. What a hoot!

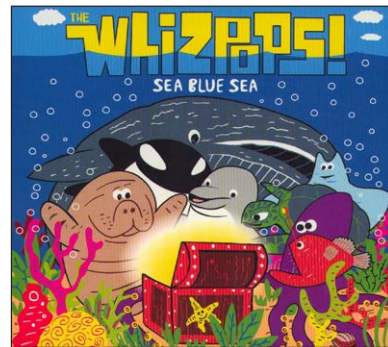
“Anglerfish” has Parisian café ambience, with its accordion shading. There’s a sweet fiddly waltz, “Whale Shark”; and “Sea Turtle” has a Cajun piano sound.

The finale, “Octopus,” starts out as kind of a reggae-rap mix with tight harmonies à la The Lettermen, if that makes sense. Our protagonist raps, “I am an octopus with eight arms on my body which would come in handy if I practiced karate.” Ha! Midway it hypes up into a Calypso beat before returning to the lush harmony riff and fading out.

This album is funny and informative, with great musicianship and excellent production: the perfect package for teaching kids. The lyrics to their songs can be downloaded from their website, as well.

The Whizpops received *Creative Child Magazine’s* 2013 Educational CD of the Year Award for their last album, *Science and Wonder*. Can’t wait to see what accolades this one brings.

Visit the group at [www.thewhizpops.com](http://www.thewhizpops.com).



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## State of the Arts welcomes CDs

*State of the Arts* welcomes CD submissions by Montana musicians for inclusion in the About Music section. The recordings must be professional, commercially available, full-length CDs, with cover art and liner notes. Brief biographical information on band members would be helpful to the writer.

Please send submissions to either the Montana Arts Council, PO Box 202201, Helena, MT, 59620; or *Lively Times*, 33651 Eagle Pass Trl., Charlo, MT 59824.